

## Rabbi's Message April 2022

Dear Friends,

On Monday, April 7, 1873, 149 years ago this week, Rivka Leah and Shelomo Naphtali Herz Jonas welcomed their fifth of seven children, baby girl Beila, to their Belarusian family (*I remember the date, April 7, by the way, because 93 years later to the day, on April 7, 1966, Dorothy and Seth Dubin welcomed their third and final child, baby boy Andrew Ross, to their NYC family*). Over the remaining 78 years of her life, Beila, whose name would be changed to Belle later in childhood, and then Paula when the family moved to Moscow, and then finally Hemda in marriage, would go on to become one of the most important catalysts in the formation of our modern Jewish identity today, even as most people remember her husband's name far more readily than hers.

Hemda's role in the transformation of our national Jewish identity actually begins well before she herself entered the picture – ten years to be exact – when, in 1881, her older sister, Devora, wed a young visionary named Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. As Eliezer had made abundantly clear prior to marriage, his chief ambition in life was to revive/create Hebrew as the standard spoken language of everyday life for the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, and in order to accomplish his dream, it would have to be his bride's dream, too. Fortunately, Devora agreed, and together, the two embarked on a new life together in Jerusalem. Over the following decade, as Eliezer poured his entire being into creating a new Hebrew dictionary for modern speakers of a modernized Hebrew, Devora's mission was to help her husband see to it that their five children would be raised as the first native Hebrew speakers since the biblical era.

Tragically, just ten years into marriage, Devora contracted tuberculosis, a common scourge in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem. After a brief and virulent illness, she succumbed, but not before reaching out to her sister (at this point named Paula), and imploring her to come to Jerusalem to take her place as mother and wife. Fortunately, for both the Ben-Yehudah family in particular and the Jewish people in general, Paula agreed. What Paula did not know at the time, however, was that within ten days of her sister's passing, three of Devora and Eliezer's children would join their mother in death. So when Paula, whose name changed yet again upon marriage, this time by her new husband to Hemda (Hebrew for "precious one"), became Mrs. Ben Yehuda on March 29, 1892 (130 years ago last week), the husband and two children she inherited had already suffered untold loss.

As a new mother, she loved her two new step-children dearly, as a new wife she doted on her husband, and as a new partner in Eliezer's all-encompassing mission to revitalize the Hebrew language, she jumped in with a full heart to the task of learning spoken Hebrew. In fact, she reached basic fluency within just six months, thus enabling her to raise not only her sister's two surviving children with Hebrew as their first language, but her own six biological children she would produce with Eliezer (two of whom died as children) in the same manner as well.

In addition to establishing Hebrew as the language at home, as a journalist, poet, and author, Hemda made it her mission to spread Hebrew to the general public as well as through the written word. Additionally, with her keen feminist sense, Hemda also fought tirelessly to ensure that the

growing Jewish population in pre-State Israel would live up to the values of equality between the sexes the early pioneers espoused.

In the end, because of her dedication to Eliezer, to the Jewish people, and to the Hebrew language, Hemda made herself entirely indispensable in the process of ensuring her children would indeed become the first set of siblings in the modern era with Hebrew as their native tongue, thus leading us to a whole new aspect to Jewish identity of today.

One of my highlights being Rabbi of the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey during 5782 has been the fact that we've successfully transformed our Sunday School from being a time for our kids to come together for Jewish learning into a time for members of *every* generation to come together for Jewish learning. Two efforts in particular, both of which seek to make the Hebrew language more accessible, have proven particularly successful. The first is Student Cantor Shayna's Torah Cantillation Class, which has prepared students with the tools to chant Torah at services. The second is my weekly Hebrew Class, which has brought increasing literacy to a number of adult learners, some of whom have been tutoring *b'nei mitzvah* kids for years without understanding the Hebrew words they've been teaching, while others of whom have been reciting Hebrew prayers by rote for decades without even knowing how to identify those same Hebrew words when written out on the page. Beyond learning just how to sound out the words, however, these students are now in the ongoing process of learning how to translate into English the Hebrew sounds they are reading. Though much of the Hebrew we've been learning has been Biblical and Rabbinic in form, a good portion has also been Modern, which never would have been possible had it not been for Hemda and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's pioneering work.

With this growing knowledge, our learners are forging their own deepening Jewish identities, which is also giving them new connections to world Jewry that they'd never experienced before. In the end, while I fully believe that God hears our prayers in whatever language we offer them – Hebrew or not – so too do I agree with Hemda and Eliezer Ben Yehuda, whose work was guided by a simple, deeply visionary sentence: *"With a common language, we can become a nation."* Indeed.

And so, on this 149<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hemda Ben-Yehuda's birth (April 7, 1873), and the 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hemda and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's wedding (March 29, 1892), to these two builders of modern Jewish identity, I thank you on behalf of our ever-grateful Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey.

L'Shalom,  
Rabbi Dubin

P.S. For anyone seeking a way to honor either the birthday of Hemda Ben-Yehuda, or the anniversary of her marriage to Eliezer ([or the 56<sup>th</sup> birthday of your rabbi](#)), allow me to suggest,

humbly, that you consider making a donation to the general operating fund of the Jewish Center of Northwest Jersey. Donations can be made on-line at <https://jcnwj.org/6892-2/>.